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Sandia proposes building lab on US-Mexico border

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Sandia National Laboratories wants to create an unprecedented binational lab that would straddle the US-Mexico border. The lab's mission would be to develop community wealth.

Sandia officials said economic disparity is a root cause of conflict and the antidote is sustainable economic development.

"Sandia will put as much emphasis on conflict avoidance and resolution as it has put on national security in the past," said Gary Jones, manager of the lab's international partnership development office.

The binational lab — meant to attract the best and brightest scientists from both countries — would create ideas to solve environmental, health and economic problems on the border.

Officials say the lab's technology also would generate business development that could impact global markets and help lift border communities out of poverty.

Gerold Yonas, lead scientist for Sandia's Advanced Concepts Group, said the idea for the binational lab came to him as he wandered through a poor section of Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas.

Yonas chose nearby Santa Teresa, which is about midway along the 2,000-mile US-Mexico border, as the location for the lab.

Jones said the lab will be an entirely new concept and venture.

"It is not a branch of Sandia on the border; it is not a national lab like Sandia; and it is not a research center," he said.

The lab would involve many entities united to bring practical solutions to border problems. The concept is "bringing the brains to the problem instead of the problem to the brains," Yonas said.

So far, Yonas' group has developed partnership relations with Gary Scott, assistant manager of the DOE's Carlsbad office, and the United States-Mexico Foundation for Science.

Sandia scientists said they would like to link the lab with business, education and government groups to increase per capita income and solve infrastructure problems.

"It's an unprecedented opportunity that was handed to us on a silver platter. . . . It's meant to be," Yonas said. "Changing scarcity to abundance — imagine the change in the spirit of people."